

# For the Sake of the Job

## Just how far will a right of way agent go?



BY ROBYN NELSON

Right of way agents can be asked to do any number of things during the course of their negotiations. Securing an easement is foremost in any successful agent's mind, even if it means having to disregard all thoughts of decorum, cleanliness and dignity for the sake of the job. Trust me, my husband, Byron knows this first hand.

Byron had pulled into the dairy office parking lot sporting a neatly pressed shirt, starched and creased Wranglers, a folder with an easement (that had been contentious at best), and a smile. Having been assigned to this particular landowner only because other agents had been told to never step foot on the place again after more than a year of negotiations, Byron held slim hope that they would even let him in the door. Thoughts of a signed document seemed like a pipe dream at that point. It was a make or break deal for the project, and everyone on the project was betting that it would be a break.

As he pushed open the office door, a woman sat with her arms folded across her ample chest and glared. Introducing himself, Byron politely explained why he was there. His explanation solicited a mere grunt as a response. He continued talking, only to be interrupted by the woman telling him that she'd run everybody else off and he wasn't invited to stay.

Byron acknowledged that he knew he wasn't welcome there, but he refused to back down and continued touting the virtues of the project. This time he was interrupted by a cell phone ringing. The woman answered it and exploded with a "Holy #@\*%." Glaring at Byron standing in front of her she asked, "Doesn't anyone have a damn brain around here?" Not knowing whether this was a question directed at him personally or humanity in general, Byron wisely kept quiet.

The woman jumped up and grabbed the keys to the new black Cadillac Escalade parked out front. She rushed past Byron, grabbed the office door and then turned to him inquisitively, "Are you coming or not?" He knew it wasn't really a question at all, and that it would imply a lack of brains if he chose to just stand there. So he headed to the car not having the vaguest idea where he might be going. "Somebody left the damn gate open and the heifers are everywhere," she exclaimed. The Escalade was already moving and spraying gravel by the time he pulled his door shut.

Now, Cadillac's are noted for their smooth, comfortable rides, but navigating cross country with the gas pedal floored negated the comfort factor. They bumped and jostled toward the field where the young cows were fanning out. Heading in that direction, they passed the barn where the dairy crew was working. The woman at the wheel slowed imperceptively and yelled something that was definitely a gringoized version of Spanglish, which neither the cowboys nor Byron could understand. The tone, however, conveyed urgency in any language and again inferred the lack of brain power collectively in the human beings in the immediate vicinity, Byron included.

The cowboys grabbed some ropes of varying lengths and headed out in broken down trucks, (some of which were missing their doors), while others climbed into their muddy, duct-taped four wheelers. The Caddy came in from one direction, while the cowboys came in from the other. Converging on the escaped heifers from both directions caused the chaos to become even more pronounced. Cattle were darting in every direction, except toward the pen from which they'd come. Because they were dairy cows, the females gravitated toward the group of workers trying to herd them assuming that there would be food. In fact, many were circling back and coming straight up to the vehicles instead of moving away from them.

"This has turned into a real cluster @3#%," the woman declared. With the entire round-up crew using gestures, profanity, and a bit of luck, they finally managed to get most of the herd into something resembling a group, heading somewhat in the same direction, but taking somewhat close to an hour and a half. More profanities in two, possibly three languages (if you counted hers), were being hurled toward the docile milkers to be. The cowboys had at least managed to work their way over to the same side of the herd as the Cadillac. Now the pushing, cajoling and cursing was only coming from one side.

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Finally, the cattle turned as a group and headed toward the gate. The friendliness they had just demonstrated for the past hour (by walking toward their herders instead of being pushed), disappeared when they turned toward the pen. The little females took off at a dead run, missing the gate and scattering once again.

A yell went up from the cowboys. One of the young cows had hit the plastic lining of the sump pond and slid into the mucky sludge. She was swimming with her head up, but she couldn't do that for long. One of the pseudo vaqueros found a rope and built a loop. Swinging it above his head, he ran down the edge of the sump and threw the rope. He missed. He pulled it back up, dripping with slime and tried it again, and again and again. One of the other hands managed to finally put a rope around the young heifer's neck, but the rope was so short he couldn't manage to hang onto it without going into the muck himself. So he let go.



The woman looked over at Byron, and just as another heifer slammed into the passenger door of the new Escalade, she asked, "Can you rope?" Without hesitating, she yelled "Damn," and then cut loose with a long line of adjectives that didn't describe the guilty heifer in particularly attractive terms. As she looked back at the pond, she realized that the heifer was getting tired of swimming and was probably going to drown. "Well, can you? That's three thousand dollars worth of bovine in there," she said.

Realizing the wrong answer could elicit another barrage of profanities, Byron answered, "I can," as he jumped out of the now dented Escalade and took the dripping rope from the young cowboy and built his loop. Swinging it several times above his head to lengthen the loop, all the while dripping crud onto his head and shoulders, he let go, dropping it gracefully over the cow's head. Pulling up the slack, he ran along the bank slipping and sliding as he went, guiding the swimming cow to the shallow end of the pond. Seeing the difficulty that Byron was having in maintaining his balance, another young cowboy threw a rope around Byron's waist to help hold him and keep him from sliding into the pond. So, with the rope around his middle, he waded in to a point that he could dig his boots in and began pulling on the heifer to encourage her to find her footing. She began clawing at the side, but because of the plastic lining, couldn't find purchase.

Byron handed the now very slippery rope to one of the cowboys and grabbed the short rope that was still around her neck, trailing in the sludge. He slipped a bit, and the boy holding him tugged hard to make sure he didn't fall. A "humph" came from Byron, as the air gushed out of him quickly. He doubled over, and in broken Spanish told the boy to ease off - as he was being cut in two! The helper backed up a step to help relieve tension on the rope and signaled to the guy with a loop around the heifer to begin pulling. They began



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pulling with everything they had. The heifer found some traction at last and finally lunged out. As she came free, both Byron and the boy holding the rope on his waist fell backwards, and the dung covered cow ran right over the top of them, spraying both men with a disgusting coat of brownish-green scum. They both dropped their ropes as the cow stopped a few feet away, dripping, wobbly and exhausted, but safe.

The heifer and Byron looked remarkably alike at this point, virtually indistinguishable thanks to the patina of excrement covering them. The woman had pulled closer in her dented Caddy to watch the muck-splashed rodeo, and when Byron walked up to her car, she burst out laughing. "That nice shirt don't look so nice now."

He looked at her hard, thinking of all kinds of impolite retorts, but being the professional that he is, simply said, "Now, about that easement...." There were several agents who lost bets that day as he returned with a odorous, somewhat stained, but signed easement in hand! ☆



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